

Probing into the Cultural Politics and Aesthetics of the 19th Century Colonial Bengal Theatre: Insights from Binodini Dasi's *My Story* (1912)

Siddhartha Ghosh

Independent Researcher

Email: siddharthaghosh6291@gmail.com

Received on: November 14, 2024 | Accepted on: December 16, 2024 | Published on: December 29, 2024

Abstract

This research paper titled 'Probing into the Cultural Politics and Aesthetics of the 19th Century Colonial Bengal Theatre: Insights from Binodini Dasi's My Story (1912)' delves into the underlying sense of nationalism in Binodini Dasi's autobiography. She was one of the pioneers of the 19th century Public theatre in Colonial Calcutta. She was born into a family of prostitutes and she started doing theatre to sustain her family at the age of 11. She started her training under Ganga Baiji, a renowned courtesan. After her first appearance on the stage, she became an absolute sensation. First, she performed the role of a hand-maiden of Draupadi at the Great National Theatre in 1874. After that, she got various roles as heroines in other plays such as Sita (in Sitaharan, Rabanbadh), Pramila (in Meghnadbadh), Draupadi (in Pandaver Agyatabas), Kaikeyi (in Ramer Bonobas), Uttara (in Abhimanyubadh), Gopa (in BuddhadebCharit), Kanchan (in Sadhabar Ekadashi), Kamini (in NabinTapaswini), Radhika (in Sati Ki Kalankini). Her experiences as a courtesan and later as a celebrated theatre actress represent a unique representation of the intersection of gender, theatre, and nationalism shaping colonial Bengal. While the autobiography does not voice overt nationalist ideologies, this study attempts to establish Binodini Dasi's narrative within this nationalist milieu. During the time of the Swadeshi Movement and Bengali nationalism, theatre became a tool to create a sense of cultural identity and pride among Bengalis. At this transitional phase Binodini Dasi's role in Neel Darpan (Indigo Planters Mirror), in 1875, at Lucknow's Chhattar-manjil, challenged the social injustices during the colonial oppression and helped to recreate a narrative of national unity and resistance.

Keywords: Cultural Politics, Aesthetics, 19th Century, Colonial Bengal, Theatre, Binodini Dasi, Autobiography, Nationalism, Courtesan, Bengali Nationalism, Neel Darpan, Social Injustices.

Introduction

The eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have often been regarded as a period of profound regression in the cultural and educational history of Bengal, a time frequently described as a 'dark age.' This era was marked by a significant decline in intellectual and cultural progress, with women suffering acutely from systemic deprivation within both familial and societal structures.

Despite constituting half of the population, women were denied basic rights, including access to education, which was viewed as neither necessary nor desirable for them. While the education of men was actively promoted across various cultures, women were relegated to the margins, ensnared by superstition and patriarchal orthodoxy. Education for women was not only considered unnecessary but it was also feared as a potential threat to the patriarchal order. Several

deeply entrenched beliefs posited that an educated woman would bring misfortune, particularly to her husband. Orthodox periodicals like *Samacharchandrika* perpetuated such notions, issuing dire warnings that the education of girls would expose them to mortal danger. These publications reinforced the notion that a male-dominated society could not ensure the safety of women, and they stoked fear by suggesting that young girls attending school would be vulnerable to sexual violence, assaulted by men supposedly unable to control their carnal desires. In such a social environment, education for women was not just discouraged—it was actively depicted as perilous, an ideological prison that kept women in the shackles of ignorance, reinforcing their subjugation. This paper seeks to explore this historical context, tracing the roots of these oppressive beliefs and their profound impact on the status and rights of women in Bengal, while also examining the gradual emergence of reformist movements that sought to challenge and dismantle these deeply ingrained social structures. William Adam's reports on Vernacular Education in Bengal and Bihar, submitted in 1835 provide a detailed examination of the state of indigenous education during that period. These reports highlight that due to these superstitions, women's education was synonymous with fear and sorrow. Also, the Muslim religion considered women's education as inauspicious (Sarkar 156-157).

On the other hand, there are several socio-religious organisations and figures like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who emphasise the importance of women's education. In 1819, Christian missionaries founded the 'Calcutta Female Juvenile Society.' By 1825, this organisation had established six girls' schools with a total of 160 students. In 1821, the Foreign School Society of England also took the initiative to set up girls' schools in Bengal. In doing so, the organisation collaborated with the Calcutta School Society. On May 7, 1849,

Drinkwater Bethune, a legal member of the Indian government, founded the 'Hindu Female School.' The establishment of this girls' school was a significant event in the history of women's education in Bengal. Prominent figures from the Young Bengal group, such as Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay, Ramgopal Ghosh, Madanmohan Tarkalankar, and Vidyasagar, contributed to the establishment of this institution. Girls from respectable families received an education at this school. Only after the East India Company enacted the *Wood's Despatch of 1854*, which contained the Educational Development Programme, in 1854 were women's employment and education given special attention, and the government took on the duty of ensuring that women were literate. "The importance of female education in India cannot be overstated, and we have seen with delight the evidence which is now shown of an increased willingness on the part of many of the locals of India to give their daughters a good education," the Wood's Despatch read ("Wood's Despatch of 1854" 33). Although instances of learned women existed in nineteenth-century Bengal, such figures were rare and exceptional, standing in stark contrast to the overwhelming majority of women who remained mired in illiteracy, particularly those from ordinary households. The educated women of this era, like Harasundari Devi, granddaughter of Maharaja Sukhmoy Ray and daughter of Raja Shivchandra Ray, were outliers in a largely patriarchal society. Harasundari Devi began her education at the age of five, under the tutelage of a Vaishnav monk, later expanding her studies to Sanskrit under the guidance of a Brahmin, and she became proficient in reading the *Ramayana*. Another such learned woman, Dravamayi Devi, was educated in Sanskrit by her father, Chandicharan Tarkalankar. These examples, however, were rare exceptions in a society where education for women was not a priority. During this period, nationalist reformers sought to construct an idealised vision of the *bhadramahila*,

or respectable woman, blending elements of Western education with the values and traditions of the East. However, this construction of the "new woman" was underpinned by a new form of patriarchy that, while appearing to offer women greater freedom, maintained strict control over their roles and autonomy. The binaries of home and world, man and woman, spiritual and material were left largely unchallenged. The new patriarchy provided women with limited and controlled freedom, which was carefully curated by male authority figures, be it the father or the husband. This so-called freedom was neither autonomous nor liberating in the true sense, but rather a means of sustaining patriarchal structures under the guise of modernization. This thesis will interrogate the role of education in shaping the image of the *bhadramahila* and the ways in which the intersection of nationalism, gender, and patriarchy defined the contours of women's lives during this critical period of transformation in Bengal.

It happens because Binodini Dasi, unlike the so-called respectable woman or *bhadramahila* of the middle class, actively engaged in the public theatres and violated the codes of propriety that regulated these women. Dasi was a professional actress and, therefore, a 'fallen' woman who defied the mould and expectations of a respectable woman. Her career and life represent the contradiction of the colonial and nationalist construct of the feminine ideal of woman as the domesticated and obedient female as depicted in Rabindranath Tagore's novel, *The Home and the World*. The power relations are clearly demonstrated when the wife, Bimala, is bound by the norms and has to conform to the societal expectations of a good wife to maintain social order and this is in compliance with her husband Nikhil. However, when Bimala starts exercising her newly found freedom and making decisions on her own it leads to complete havoc implying the fact that the emancipation of women is not

something which was welcomed or easy within the framework of the nationalist movement (Spivak 127-144). By situating Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha* (My Story) within the backdrop of colonial Bengal, this research aims to critically analyse and understand the cultural politics and aesthetics of the Bengali theatre with special reference to the operation of space and gender manners, in turn, acting out and opposing the dominant discourses of morality, respectability and feminine identity. In this way, this study is able to provide a vital counterpoint to existing understandings of colonial discourses of gender culture and power (Chakrabarty 23- 49; Chatterjee 63-72).

The 19th century was a period of profound social and political transformation in Bengal, largely precipitated by British colonial rule. While the British attempted to impose Western ideals and governance, Bengal, particularly Calcutta, became the site of a cultural renaissance known as the Bengal Renaissance. This period was marked by intense intellectual activity, spearheaded by reformist thinkers and writers who sought to redefine Indian identity in response to colonial modernity. Public theatre in Bengal emerged as a key space where these cultural negotiations unfolded. Theatre provided a unique platform for engaging with both indigenous traditions and Western dramatic forms. It also became a critical arena for addressing social injustices, reflecting and shaping the evolving consciousness of the time. As the 19th century progressed, Bengal theatre moved beyond mere entertainment and took on an increasingly political and nationalist character, reflecting the tensions between colonial oppression and the emerging desire for self-determination. The public theatre was instrumental in bringing social and political discourse to a broader audience. Unlike earlier religious or courtly performances, these productions engaged with contemporary themes, including colonial exploitation, social reform, and

the status of women. The Bengali-educated middle-class embraced the anti-British theatrical productions like Dinabandhu Mitra's *Neel Darpan* (*The Indigo Planters' Mirror*), *Sarajini*, *Bharat Mata* and cultivated a new nationalistic spirit and exposed the atrocities of British indigo planters, aligning theatre with the emerging anti-colonial struggle. As Partha Chatterjee notes in his analysis of the nationalist discourse in colonial Bengal, the public sphere became bifurcated into two distinct yet interconnected domains: the material (outer) and the spiritual (inner). According to Chatterjee, while the British could claim superiority in the material domain—represented by political power, economic control, and technology—Indians sought to assert their identity and sovereignty within the spiritual domain, which included culture, religion, and gender roles (Chatterjee, 119).

Within this framework, the theatre became part of the spiritual domain, where the cultural identity of Bengal could be asserted, free from colonial influence. Although plays were subject to British censorship, they subtly imbued nationalist themes, often through symbolic representations of historical or mythological narratives. For instance, in plays like “Meghnad Badh Kavya”, based on the Ramayana, audiences found resonances with the struggle for national liberation, even when the narrative did not explicitly reference contemporary colonial politics. Theatre thus became a site of cultural resistance, where the values and traditions of Bengal could be reasserted against the backdrop of British domination. By reclaiming mythological and historical figures, these plays affirmed a sense of continuity with India's pre-colonial past, while also engaging with the modern aspirations of self-rule and sovereignty. One of the most striking aspects of the public theatre in colonial Bengal was its engagement with gender, both in terms of its representation on stage and its social implications. As women's education began to be

promoted by reformists like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the role of women in public life - including theatre - became a subject of both fascination and controversy. On the one hand, the theatre provided a space where women could challenge societal norms by performing roles that gave them visibility and agency. On the other hand, the women who participated in theatre were often marginalised and viewed as transgressing traditional boundaries of femininity and respectability.

The appearance of native actresses on the Bengali stage is witnessed as a turning point in the history of Bengali theatre which has a close relation with the process of the rise of theatrical realism in the last decade of the eighteenth century (Goswami 35). Before that change, where men acted female roles were gradually eliminated and paved the way for women to take the limelight both physically and figuratively. This transition was not easy going through, because the actresses who were usually hired for the profession from backgrounds such as prostitution rebelled against traditional female roles and the dominance of male authority (Raychaudhuri 78). Therefore, their presence in theatre contributed not only to the growth and restructuring of the theatre economy but also to the reconceptualisation of cultural values of Bengali society, and the change of perception of gender roles. These actresses had a significant role in changing the axis of the new-age Bengali theatre that opened new avenues and horizons to explore new themes and stories (Sen 42). Their presence thus enriched theatre performances, turning the stage to be a ferment of socio-cultural formation and dealing vividly with the crises of gender and identity which were so much a part of the emerging new socio-cultural Calcutta/Bengal. A typical successful change agent in this regard was Binodini Dasi who rose to become a prominent cultural figure in the Bengali theatrical field, working in theatres with a proscenium that introduced a Western style and

ethos to the Bengali theatres (Ray 105). Despite engaging in sensual performances, Binodini displayed and advocated for the images of womanhood that were appreciated by the Bengali audience and which countered the lascivious image of the 'other' as constructed by the colonial masters, in her autobiography, *Amar Katha* (Dasi 20). Such representation not only complicated the construction of female character on the proscenium but also suggests a colonial Bengali engagement with issues of liberal subjectivity and power. The new generation of native actresses also saw a great demand in the theatre economy by drawing the middle class and playing an important role in the culture of Bengal (Banerjee 50). These actresses as agents of change transformer took advantage of the theatre to reshape gender roles and culture in the face of colonial imperialism. Their stories illustrate the processes of sociocultural change characteristic of the era, indicating that society was on the verge of the breakup of the colonial empire on the one hand, and modernization on the other.

The emergence of Binodini Dasi reflected the contradictions inherent in the evolving status of women during this period. While reformers were advocating for women's education and participation in public life, they were simultaneously constructing the ideal of the *bhadramahila* (respectable woman), whose role remained largely confined to the private sphere. Women in the theatre, like Binodini, did not fit into this emerging ideal, which meant that while they were celebrated for their talents, they were also stigmatised as 'fallen' women. Theatre thus became a contested space for gender identity. As Partha Chatterjee argues, the nationalist project constructed the image of the "new woman" to embody the spiritual domain of the home—a place untouched by colonial materialism. (Chatterjee 135) However, the involvement of women in theatre subverted this binary by placing them in the public domain, traditionally seen as

the realm of men. Women like Binodini Dasi thus occupied a liminal space, simultaneously resisting and reinforcing the societal roles ascribed to them. Binodini's work can also be compared to Rassundari Devi, who was the first Bengali woman to write an autobiography, *Amar Jiban* (My Life), in 1876. Rassundari's narrative, which focuses on her struggle for literacy and self-expression within the confines of a patriarchal household, contrasts sharply with Binodini's public and performative life. However, both women's writings reflect a shared desire to assert agency and individuality in a society that sought to confine women to roles of subservience and invisibility. Rassundari Devi's focus on self-education and spiritual liberation parallels Binodini's assertion of intellectual and creative autonomy in the public sphere, highlighting the diverse ways in which women in colonial Bengal challenged the restrictions placed upon them.

Binodini Dasi's career cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the contributions of the trailblazing actresses who came before her, such as Elokeshi, Ganga Baiji, Khetromoni, Rajkumari, Golap Sundari, Angurbala, and Tara Sundari, and their role in shaping the early landscape of Bengali theatre. Golap Sundari, renowned for her commanding stage presence, was one of the first women to achieve fame in the mid-19th century despite intense societal resistance to women appearing in public performances. Similarly, Tara Sundari challenged the entrenched gender norms of her time, proving that women could attain artistic excellence on stage. These actresses laid the foundation for women's participation in theatre, though their visibility often came at the cost of personal and social stigma. Building on this legacy, Binodini Dasi not only rose to prominence as a performer but also used her autobiography, *Amar Katha*, to reflect on her life and critique the structural inequalities of the theatre world. Her decision to write about her experiences represents a radical departure from

her predecessors, as she carved out a new space for women's intellectual engagement in addition to their artistic contributions. In this sense, Binodini expanded the possibilities for female agency, bridging the divide between the performative and the literary.

Chatterjee's analysis of the nationalist discourse identifies a dichotomy between the home and the world, where the "world" represented the domain of colonial modernity and public life, while the "home" was considered the spiritual and traditional domain, under the control of Indian women. In this framework, women were expected to safeguard the spiritual purity of the nation, even as men engaged with the outside world to navigate colonial modernity. However, theatre blurred these boundaries. Women on stage, such as Binodini, actively participated in the public domain by performing in plays that were viewed by a mixed audience, including the colonial elite. Binodini Dasi's autobiography, *Amar Katha*, provides crucial insights into how women navigated this complex terrain. While she was stigmatised for her profession, Binodini's career challenges Chatterjee's notion of the "new woman" as confined to the spiritual domain. By stepping onto the stage, she not only asserted her presence in the public sphere but also engaged with cultural and political narratives that were central to the nationalist discourse. Though Binodini herself does not overtly engage with nationalism in her autobiography, her life and career can be situated within the broader nationalist milieu. Her performances in plays such as *Neel Darpan*, which critiqued colonial exploitation, indirectly participated in the construction of a national identity. The character of a woman publicly performing, even as she was denied the respectability accorded to the *bhadramahila*, reveals the tensions between colonial modernity and the construction of female identity in nationalist discourse.

In 19th-century colonial Bengal, theatre played a central role in shaping public discourse, offering a platform where the cultural politics of the time were both reflected and contested. As British colonial rule intensified, theatre emerged not only as a form of entertainment but as a powerful cultural medium that navigated between Western dramatic forms and traditional Indian narratives. It became an arena where national identity, social reform, and gender politics were negotiated, often subtly challenging colonial rule and indigenous societal hierarchies. Through its aesthetic choices, including the portrayal of mythological and historical figures, the Bengali stage engaged with issues of national pride, social injustice, and the empowerment of women, even as it adhered to colonial censorship law - The Dramatic Performances Act of 1876. It aimed to regulate theatre productions that were critical of colonial rule or addressed controversial social issues, particularly in Bengal, where theatre had become a platform for social commentary and nationalist expression. This Act led to a dual impact: while it attempted to curb the freedom of artists, it also fueled a resistance movement within the theatre community, catalysing the evolution of a uniquely modern Indian theatre. One of the most significant aspects of colonial Bengal theatre was its role in cultivating a sense of cultural nationalism. Although explicit political statements were often restricted due to British censorship, the theatre became a space where national identity was indirectly asserted through symbolic means. The "outer" domain of colonial politics and governance was controlled by the British, but the "inner" cultural sphere became the site of resistance and identity formation.

The aesthetics of the colonial Bengali theatre, including its staging, costumes, and performances, were deeply intertwined with the broader politics of gender and morality. As the stage began to accommodate female actresses like Binodini Dasi, it became a battleground where

traditional ideas of femininity and respectability were both reinforced and challenged. The representation of female characters, particularly mythological or historical figures, allowed actresses to embody roles that carried cultural and moral significance. However, the presence of women in public performances also unsettled the Victorian morality imposed by the British and the emerging bourgeois respectability championed by the *bhadralok*. Binodini Dasi's portrayal of iconic female characters such as Sita, Draupadi, and Kaikeyi exemplifies how the aesthetics of gender played a pivotal role in the cultural politics of the stage. In performing these characters, Binodini was not merely reenacting mythological tales but engaging in a cultural dialogue about the position of women in society. Sita's unquestioning devotion, Draupadi's resilience and defiance, and Kaikeyi's manipulation of power each presented different models of femininity that resonated with both traditional and modern sensibilities. The characters allowed women on stage to express a range of emotions—from virtue and submission to rebellion and agency—thereby complicating the prevailing stereotypes of Indian womanhood. In the realm of aesthetics, performance and symbolism became vehicles for expressing these contradictory ideas. While the figure of Sita was often invoked to reinforce ideals of domesticity and purity, Draupadi and Kaikeyi offered alternative narratives of female power and autonomy. These portrayals did more than entertain; they encouraged audiences to reflect on the gendered dynamics of power in their own society. For women like Binodini, the very act of embodying these roles on stage became a subversive statement - a challenge to the patriarchal structures that confined women to the private sphere. In a society that marginalised women in public life, the theatre allowed them to enact agency and, in doing so, contributed to the ongoing discourse on female empowerment in colonial Bengal.

While Hindu mythological narratives were pivotal in fostering cultural pride and unity, they also created boundaries of belonging that often alienated marginalized groups, including Muslim communities, lower castes, and even certain subaltern women. The colonial state indirectly encouraged this exclusion by promoting sectarian divides in its policies, which further entrenched the dominance of Hindu cultural frameworks in the nationalist imagination. Theatre became a medium where these tensions played out. Plays rooted in Hindu mythology, while celebrated for their nationalist ethos, often mirrored the gendered hierarchies of both religion and society. For instance, mythological figures like Sita, Draupadi, and Kaikeyi, portrayed by actresses like Binodini, were revered for their strength and virtue, but their narratives also reinforced an idealized womanhood that excluded women outside the elite Hindu upper-caste paradigm. Binodini, as a performer from a marginalized background, embodied this tension. Her on-stage roles represented the nationalist ideals of moral and cultural purity, but her off-stage identity as a "fallen woman" starkly contrasted with these ideals, exposing the contradictions of religious nationalism (Chatterjee 149).

Beyond gender politics, the aesthetics of theatre in colonial Bengal also served as a tool for social critique and reform. The stage became a medium where important social issues, such as caste oppression, education, social justice, and religious reform, were debated in front of audiences who were grappling with the rapidly changing social fabric under colonialism. Bengali plays frequently critiqued the rigidity of social hierarchies, the injustices of caste, and the failure of traditional authority figures to address the challenges posed by modernity. Many of the social reform themes on stage aligned with the ideals of the Bengal Renaissance, a period of intellectual and cultural revival that sought to modernise Indian society while preserving its core

values. These themes often found their way into the performances of the period, as theatre offered an accessible platform for disseminating reformist ideas to a broader public. Binodini Dasi's performance in plays such as *Nabin Tapaswini* (which highlighted the oppression of widows) and *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (which dealt with the intricacies of caste and societal reform) exemplified how theatre contributed to these social reformist discourses. By portraying women who questioned societal norms, the theatre encouraged audiences to reconsider the traditional roles of women and the need for modernization in both cultural and social structures. The aesthetics of performance - from the use of symbolic costumes to the emotional intensity of dialogue - allowed these plays to convey a message that was simultaneously didactic and transformative.

Binodini's work can be situated within the broader colonial patronage system, which both enabled and constrained artistic expression. The Bengali theatre depended on the financial support of colonial administrators and European elites, who often sought to impose their aesthetic preferences on local productions (Mukherjee 102). This patronage shaped the content and presentation of theatrical performances, sometimes requiring the incorporation of Western theatrical styles, while simultaneously fostering a cultural hybridization that enriched the aesthetic framework of Bengali theatre. Binodini's success lay in her ability to navigate these power dynamics, integrating Western techniques of stagecraft with the emotional depth of Indian mythological traditions, thereby creating performances that appealed to both Indian and European audiences. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital sheds light on how Binodini negotiated her position in a world dominated by male patrons like Girish Chandra Ghosh. Her career and autobiography can be seen as efforts to accumulate cultural capital, asserting her intellectual and artistic contributions within a

system that marginalized women, particularly those from non-elite backgrounds. Through her narrative, Binodini reclaimed her position not merely as a passive participant in the theatre but as a creator of meaning and a shaper of Bengal's cultural identity.

Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha* offers an invaluable lens for examining the power dynamics of colonial and nationalist Bengal through a postcolonial theoretical framework. Using Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry and hybridity, we can understand how Binodini's performances simultaneously adhered to and subverted the expectations of her audience. The hybridity in her artistic style-blending Western realism with Indian traditions-created a space where colonial authority was imitated but also subtly undermined. This hybridity allowed Binodini to transcend the limitations imposed by colonial patronage while asserting her agency as a performer and cultural commentator (Bhabha 124).

In addition to social critique, the representation of historical and mythological figures on stage became a key strategy for expressing cultural resistance. These figures served as cultural symbols that connected colonial Bengal to its pre-colonial past, offering a sense of continuity and national pride. While the British controlled the material realm of governance, the theatre asserted cultural sovereignty by reclaiming India's mythological and historical heritage. The late 19th-century Bengal Renaissance, which sought to revive Indian cultural pride, found an essential ally in the theatre. Binodini's roles and those of her contemporaries became statements of cultural reclamation, reminding audiences of India's historical grandeur and resilience. The historical and mythological tales performed on stage were not mere entertainment; they were expressions of pride in India's past and a form of passive resistance against British dominance. Figures like

Chaitanya, Sita, and Draupadi were more than characters - they represented the indomitable spirit of India's cultural heritage, urging audiences to rediscover their own identity and worth. One of Binodini's most celebrated roles was her portrayal of the mystic saint Chaitanya in *Chaitanya Leela*, which showcased her skill in embodying complex spiritual and emotional expressions. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the 15th-century saint and proponent of the Bhakti (devotional) movement in Bengal, was known for his ecstatic devotion to Krishna and the unity he preached across religious divides. By playing Chaitanya, Binodini transformed the stage into a space of emotional transcendence, inviting audiences into a profound spiritual experience. In embodying Chaitanya, she invoked a figure symbolic of resistance to authoritarian structures and spiritual resilience. Chaitanya's message of Bhakti and equality struck a chord with Bengali audiences, serving as a reminder of India's deep spiritual roots and as a form of implicit protest against colonial rule. Binodini's Chaitanya inspired audiences to reconnect with their indigenous spirituality and resist the encroachment of British cultural hegemony. Binodini's roles as mythological heroines like Sita, Draupadi, and Kunti were infused with a distinct nationalist fervour. By portraying these legendary figures, she invoked ideals of strength, loyalty, and moral fortitude, aligning these characters with the collective struggle for independence. Binodini's performance as Sita from the Ramayana represented loyalty to one's homeland and the struggle for integrity in the face of adversity. This was a powerful analogy for India's own struggle under British rule, with Sita's trials reflecting the suffering and resilience of the Indian nation. Draupadi, from the Mahabharata, symbolised justice, righteousness, and the fight against humiliation. Her portrayal resonated with Bengali audiences, symbolising the need for dignity and self-respect in the face of colonial dominance. Binodini's Draupadi was not

just a character but a rallying cry for audiences to confront injustices and seek liberation, mirroring the nationalist awakening in Bengal. Through these roles, Binodini transformed herself into a living symbol of the nation's aspirations, embodying not just mythological figures but also the spirit of a people yearning for autonomy and self-respect. Her performances turned the theatre into a sanctuary of Indian values, subtly defying British attempts to marginalise and devalue Indian culture. The emotional engagement generated through these performances helped establish a sense of collective identity and solidarity among the audience, particularly the urban middle-class Bengalis (*bhadralok*), who were becoming increasingly disillusioned with colonial rule. While the plays did not call for direct action against the British, the cultural assertion within these performances encouraged audiences to think critically about their own situation under colonial rule and instilled a sense of pride in their heritage and potential for self-determination.

Conclusion

Binodini Dasi's life and career, as explored in this paper, reveal the complex intersections of gender, cultural politics, and nationalism in 19th-century colonial Bengal. As a pioneering figure in Bengali theatre, Binodini navigated a world that both celebrated and stigmatised her. Through her public performances and her autobiography, *Amar Katha*, Binodini became a symbol of female agency in a society where women were traditionally confined to the domestic sphere. Her career challenges the prevailing ideals of the *bhadramahila*, the nationalist construct of the "new woman," by demonstrating that women could assert their presence in the public sphere and play a significant role in the cultural discourse of the time. The theatre, as a space of cultural resistance, allowed Binodini to contribute to the aesthetic innovations of Bengali theatre and she also participated in the subtle yet potent

expression of nationalist sentiments. The mythological narratives, recontextualised on stage, reflected the growing nationalist consciousness that sought to reclaim India's cultural heritage and resist colonial dominance. Even though Binodini's work did not explicitly engage with the formal political aspects of nationalism, her performances indirectly supported the cultural dimensions of the nationalist project, encouraging audiences to consider the historical and mythological past as a source of pride and identity.

At the same time, Binodini's autobiography offered a critical reflection on the patriarchal structures of both colonial and nationalist society. Through her writing, she articulated the contradictions of a society that applauded her talent while condemning her social status as a 'fallen woman.' Her narrative challenges the traditional binary roles of women, highlighting the ways in which she exercised agency despite the limitations placed on her. By documenting her struggles and contributions, Binodini reclaimed her voice and established her intellectual presence, positioning herself as both an artist and a cultural commentator. Binodini Dasi's contributions to the cultural politics of colonial Bengal transcend the boundaries of theatre, extending into the broader social and nationalist currents of her time. Her ability to navigate the gendered expectations of the public and private spheres, while continuing to assert her identity as a public performer, positions her as a significant figure within the broader nationalist movement, even if her role has often been overlooked in traditional historical narratives. Her story reflects the multifaceted nature of resistance in colonial Bengal, where cultural production served as a subtle yet powerful vehicle for challenging colonial rule and asserting Indian identity.

Ultimately, Binodini Dasi's life, as captured through her performances and autobiography,

reveals the complex dynamics of gender, nationalism, and cultural politics in colonial Bengal. Her legacy serves as a reminder that the theatre - and by extension, the cultural sphere - was not merely a site of entertainment but a critical space where national identity, social reform, and female empowerment were negotiated and expressed. By situating her within the broader cultural and nationalist movements of the time, this research demonstrates the significant role that women like Binodini played in shaping the cultural landscape of colonial India and contributing to the evolving discourse on nationhood and modernity.

Works Cited and References

Amiya P. Sen 'Bengali Theatre under Colonial Rule'. A Clifford, *Beyond the Context: The Ethnographic Specular in Contemporary Analyses*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. was 62, no. 1, 2003, pp. 59-98.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Bhattacharjee, Arundhati. "Binodini Devi's 'Amar Katha': An Actress Life Through Her Autobiography." *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, vol. 5, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.1514>

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Forms of Capital*. Edited by John Richardson, translated by Richard Nice, Greenwood Press, 1986.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Popular Discourses on Domesticity in Bengal under British Rule. Alan D Mekdep: 'Uses of History', *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 36, 1993, pp. 1-34.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. Oxford, 1999.

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. First and foremost it was published by Princeton University Press in

1993.

Dasi, Binodini. *Amar Katha*. Ananya Publishing, 2010.

"Development of Women'S Education in India." *The National Institute of Open Schooling*, 13 Jun. 2024, http://nios.ac.in/media/documents/340-Gender_Studies/Ch-9.pdf

Goswami, Namita. "The Emergence of Native Actresses in Bengali Theatre: A Culture and History Review. Vol 34, no 2, *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 2018; 76, p, 33-48.

Literature and Gender. Edited by Supriya Chaudhuri and Sajni Mukherjee, Orient Longman, 2002.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

Raychaudhuri, Tapan. "Marginalization of Women in Colonial Bengal: The 19th Century Situation." *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 27, no. 1 / pp. 65-92 / 1990.

Ray, Rajat Kanta. "Bengali Theatre and the Colonial

Context: A Historical Overview." *European Humanities and Social Sciences Studies X*, issue 1, 2012, pp 99-110.

Sarkar , Tanika . *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*. Permanent Black, 2001.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Diagnosis: The texts under discussion present Michel Foucault as a thinker reacting to feminism. *The Spivak Reader*, Donna Landry & Gerald MacLean eds., Routledge, 1996 pp. 121-160.

Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Home and the World*. Penguin Classics, 2005.

Contributor

Siddhartha Ghosh

Independent Researcher and Former PG Student, Dept. of English, West Bengal State University, West Bengal, India.

Email: siddharthaghosh6291@gmail.com.